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27 January 1953

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

VIA : Assistant Director for National Estimates
Deputy Director/Intelligence

FROM : Deputy Assistant Director for National Estimates

SUBJECT : Meeting of the Consultants on National Estimates
December 1952

1. Aside from criticism of specific estimates, the discussions turned mainly on four points:

I. Are our estimates of Soviet intentions too reassuring?

2. It was generally agreed that our papers on probable Soviet courses of action, and in particular on the likelihood of general war, are too reassuring. This over-optimistic tone arises mainly from the frequent and too prominent repetition of the estimate that the Kremlin will not "deliberately initiate general war" during the period of the estimate. Most of the consultants found in this statement the implication that we might sometime be able to estimate that the Kremlin probably will deliberately initiate general war within the period of the estimate; yet the consultants considered it most unlikely that we should ever make such an estimate in the absence of clear tactical preparations observable on the Soviet side. Therefore, our estimate of the unlikelihood of deliberate Soviet initiation of general war during a relatively short future time was considered to be meaningless and falsely reassuring.

3. The same statement was also attacked on the grounds that general war does not usually happen by deliberate intent anyway; it more often comes by miscalculation. Hence we ought to subordinate our statement about Soviet deliberate initiation of war to our other statements about war arising from chains of action and reaction.

II. Are there certain years or periods in future when there will be special danger of general war?

4. Mr. Bissell thought that on the basis of present policies and trends the dangers of general war would be decidedly greater two

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or three years from now than they are now. His arguments were as follows:

- (a) Present developments seem to be altering the balance of offensive and defensive atomic capabilities to the disadvantage of the West. By about 1955 the deterrent effect of US atomic striking power will be lessened, the Soviet capability of delivering an attack will be improved, and our air defense, and especially the air defenses of our allies, will still be very weak.
- (b) Strengthening of the West in conventional military armaments will not be great enough to offset the above changes.
- (c) The probability is about 2 to 1 that within three years we shall have some serious economic dislocation -- serious to our allies even if not very bad domestically for ourselves. This dislocation will have a profoundly adverse effect abroad, and will impair the cohesiveness of the alliance opposing the Soviet Bloc.
- (d) A continuance of the present high state of tension will produce increasing general instability in the world. There is some question of the inherent ability of democracies to withstand such a situation without resort to violent action.

III. The likelihood of general war depends greatly upon US and Western policies

5. It was noted that nearly all of Bissell's propositions indicating an increasing danger of war had reference to developments in the US or Western position. Bissell admitted that if the West changed its policies in certain ways; if, for example, we developed a really formidable air defense, or if the US avoided an economic recession, then the dangers of war would be substantially lessened (or at least the increase in the danger of war would probably not take place). The consultants all agreed that the occurrence of general war would depend as much upon Western as upon Soviet policies.

6. It was pointed out by [] that all of our estimates depend on an assumption that US policies will remain stable; for this, however, we have no guarantee, and thus our estimates are precarious from the start.

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IV. What is the effect on the likelihood of war of the gradual balancing of power between East and West?

7. It was pointed out in connection with this question that the qualitative as well as the quantitative aspects of the military assets of each side is of the first importance. For example, the weakness of the West in conventional weapons has for a long time been more or less offset by its superiority in atomic weapons. Now there is developing a more balanced military power on each side -- the Soviets building up their atomic strength, and we our conventional armaments. Does this sort of equalization increase or lessen the dangers of general war?

8. Some consultants believed that this development was producing a more stable situation. It is now possible for the West to react to an act of local Soviet aggression without starting or threatening to start atomic warfare. And it is becoming less possible for the Soviets to believe that they can get away with local aggression because the West will not think the action grave enough to warrant starting a general war.

9. On the other hand it was pointed out that as each side builds up its whole range of military and economic power so that each constituent element approaches parity with the same element on the other side, neither side finds it as necessary to yield in controversies over minor matters. The probability is thus increased that recalcitrance on such minor matters might, by a chain of action and reaction, lead to general war.

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